

CHARLES JOHNSTON

Selected Poems

PUBLISHED FOR CHARLES JOHNSTON BY
THE BODLEY HEAD

LONDON SYDNEY
TORONTO

Roy Fuller writes in his Introduction:
'Charles Johnston has not only been a distinguished diplomat, he is also a distinguished translator from the Russian: these occupations have helped to conceal the bulk and quality of his work as an original poet . . . One of Johnston's outstanding qualities is the acuteness of his observation of both city and country, and the clean accuracy with which he gets the observation on paper. This is most easily seen, perhaps, in the "Postcards from Spain" . . . It is a considerable novelty to find . . . a man of affairs versifying the experiences of his everyday working life . . . The quality we . . . label "the poetic" . . . is in Johnston closely connected with a felicity of language in conveying a discriminating observation.
For instance: "Sweatiness of the raspberry / slithering down its cone" (from the remarkable elegy on the death in action of his brother) . . . He has one characteristic as a poet that particularly appeals to me: his development, his successes, his originality, are worked for, come from an on-going response to life, to the challenge of versifying it; and we never feel that anything is brought in for mere effect or fashion'.

ROY FULLER, poet, novelist and critic, was Professor of Poetry at Oxford from 1968 to 1973, and won The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1970.

(continued on back flap)

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INTRODUCTION

I feel less guilty at interposing myself between the reader and these poems by recalling that I myself until comparatively recently was pretty ignorant about them. Charles Johnston has not only been a distinguished diplomat; he is also a distinguished translator from the Russian: these occupations have helped to conceal the bulk and quality of his work as an original poet. Another eminent public figure, Sir George Rostrevor Hamilton, prefaced his collected poems by remarking that though throughout his poetic career he had remained a Civil Servant he had 'never regarded poetry as a second string to that honourable profession, or as a hobby'. I imagine Charles Johnston would be willing to adopt that sentiment: his poems are utterly professional and express the whole man.

A word first about the craft. Poems will be found here in techniques of varying complication — from the Spenserian stanzas of 'Towards Mozambique' to a blank verse flexible enough for colloquial effects. For part of the period during which Charles Johnston has been writing, I fear the traditional English metres have been out of fashion, anyone capable of mastering them often regarded with suspicion. One result is that some readers may not be able to think of modern poetry in the terms, say, of complicated stanza forms. For that reason, newcomers to Johnston should perhaps leave 'Towards Mozambique' till more accustomed to the author's style and subjects.

There is another reason for postponing the reading of such a poem. One of Johnston's outstanding qualities is the acuteness of his observation of both city and country, and the clean accuracy with which he gets the observation on paper. This is most easily seen, perhaps, in the 'Postcards from Spain'. During his time in that land in the late Forties its scenery and language (several translations from Lorca are

included here, which will freshly illuminate aspects of that poet for English readers) plainly made a striking impression, and this series of poems is among the most attractive in the book:

Over the smooth plain crossed by oily smears
of snailtrack, tiny fisher-boats are rowing
with the calm haste of ants . . .

for example, and:

Westward the capes and mountains are uniformed
blueblack on lemon; but look east, and find
the day with all its colour-range surviving
in spectral faintness . . .

At the end of the last poem of 'Postcards from Spain' appears a feature that can be found throughout this book — the author's sharpness of mind. After a Spanish shooting-expedition

Our neighbour poured
whisky from a flask onto a partridge-breast
and made a mudpie of it from the wet
red earth, then baked it, mud and all, in one
of the perfumed cistus-fires, and spiked us both
a sliver. It tasted just like any partridge —
but underdone. We said it was a marvel.

As may be imagined, Johnston's irony and wit have most scope in the extended narratives. Here, for example, is a stanza from 'Towards Mozambique' about an anticlimactic party in Japan:

This time, however, all is cold and stale,
The whisky raw, insipid the saké,
Loathsome the seaweed, nauseous root and kale,
Stodgy the rice as in our nursery day.

The geisha haven't anything to say
But wait like London debts to be amused —
You feel that their mamas have had to pay —
And in their Pompadours you'd be confused
To guess just where begins the horsehair that
they've used.

Despite the Byronic echoes, it is a considerable novelty to find in this poem, and in other pieces, a man of affairs versifying the experiences of his (everyday) working life, so accustomed are we to the poet merely in his role as man of letters. Myself, I find it refreshing to come across some adroitly-put piece of know-how such as this:

On waters of the world the starboard tack
Has right of passage. But an Attaché
On Lake Chuzénji finds his future black
Unless he is contented to give way
To any Acting Interim Chargé
Approaching on the port tack, and to shun,
Working as close to windward as he may,
Each Consul-General passing on the run,
Nor luff an *Excellence* before the starting gun.

But one wouldn't want to over-emphasise the elements of satire and narrative in this selection. There is, above all, the quality we more or less vaguely label 'the poetic'. In Johnston (as perhaps in most poets) this is closely connected with a felicity of language in conveying a discriminating observation. For instance: 'Sweatiness of the raspberry/slithering down its cone' (from the remarkable elegy on the death in action of his brother); and, from 'Sounding Song':

The water's knife-thin sliver
Of glass lies over the ground,
A pane our keel would shiver
If I should cease to sound.

It would, also, be completely remiss of me not to call attention to a poetic effect that arrives where language and observation is allied to a mysteriousness of subject. Perhaps this is most clearly seen in the two sonnets, 'Echo Sonnet' and 'The Strongroom'. In the latter a quite splendid Popean poetic resonance is achieved:

Behind the dial that moves in silent round
Its numbered face against the numbered rose,
The cogs prepare their calculated part
And stealthy tumblers wait the sign to close;
Until, the group of sovereign figures found,
The lock within its algebraic heart
Is touched to a predictable remorse
And yields to cyphers what it bars from force.

I have by no means indicated the whole of Charles Johnston's range (not illustrating, for example, what many may find the most accessible pieces in the book, the autobiographical and extremely original 'The Irish Lights') but I feel satisfied that my quotations will have demonstrated his power and (almost equally important) his musicality. He has one characteristic as a poet that particularly appeals to me: his development, his successes, his originality, are worked for, come from an on-going response to life, to the challenge of versifying it; and we never feel that anything is brought in for mere effect or fashion. He puts the business very well himself in his ironic 'Footnote to Housman':

Lucid intervals may be admitted,
but be lucid the whole time who dares.

ROY FULLER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of these poems were written in Japan, before the war or during wartime internment — an experience which “Towards Mozambique” evokes in narrative form. There is an “Elegy” on the death of a brother, killed in the Far East towards the end of the war. Other poems, written at home after my return, reflect the Japanese strangeness of such familiar scenes as a Scottish river, or the Solent, when looked at again after seven years in the East.

“Sickness and Death” includes a poem on the death of my friend the Australian poet David Campbell, who combined a most delicate lyrical gift with the robustness of the outback and the stoicism of the wartime fighter pilot.

“The Irish Lights” is dedicated to the memory of Robert Lowell, in admiring reference to his *Life Studies*. The poem presents figures and scenes as perceived by a number of different watchers: an abnormally simple-minded small boy at a private school in Shropshire; an older boy, at Winchester, with a rush of sophistication to the head; a sceptical junior official in the imperial Orient; an observer of — and marrier into — the great Russian diaspora; a late beginner in literary London; and an introspective yachtsman who has just been appointed to a small embassy.

“The Man of Fashion” recalls the critic and bibliophile John Hayward, whom I knew when he was sharing a flat with T.S. Eliot in the late forties. When I met him, John was already at an advanced stage of the cruel illness which eventually killed him. With his huge, lolling head, lips sticking out like plates, and twisted, laborious handshake — the action of a spin bowler delivering a particularly crafty googly — he was, to look at, a *monstre sacré*; but the shock of his appearance soon vanished under the spell of his conversation, the sparkling wit laced with malice (and, as he would have instantly admitted, a dash of snobbery), the

magisterial commentary on books and writers. He was responsible for the appearance, in 1947, of my first book of poems, called *Towards Mozambique*; it was published by the now defunct Cresset Press, whose editorial adviser he was. The portrait of Hayward in T.S. Matthews' book about Eliot, *Great Tom*, does him less than justice, and I have tried to evoke his memory in a friendlier and jollier way.

Some of these poems were included in a reading of my poems and translations which I gave in October 1984 at the Library of Congress in Washington.

C.H.J.

Acknowledgements are due to: *Personal Landscape*, Cairo; *Personal Landscape: an Anthology of Exile*, published by Editions Poetry London in 1945; Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*; Peter Quennell's *Cornhill*; and Michael Schmidt's *PN Review*; in which some of these poems originally appeared. A number of them were published by the Cresset Press in 1947 under the title *Towards Mozambique*; and in collections called *Estuary in Scotland* (1974), *Poems and Journeys* (1979), *Rivers and Fireworks* (1980), *Talk about the Last Poet* (1981), *Choiseul and Talleyrand* (1982), and *The Irish Lights* (1983). The last five of these were published by The Bodley Head for Charles Johnston.

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COLOUR PRINTS

The Hatchery

The shallow conduit shakes in all
Its width, and *feels* the waterfall.
Watch how the before-breakfast sun
Lights up the fish and, one by one,
Projects their shadows, crisp and cold,
Across a couch of leaves and mould.
Smoky and plump are those that take
The beams, and solid, and opaque.
Others, that swim against the light,
Would tempt a fainter appetite,
The flimsiest eating, frail as air
And lucid as their watery lair.
Succulent trout, that bask and gleam
And hang immobile, head to stream:
Edible shapes, sun-grilled but cool,
Caught in the aspic of the pool.

I. The River

Over the rockbed, over the waterfall,
Tense as a brushstroke tumbles the cataract
Yugawa — called hotwater river,
Warm at the source, though the lower torrent

Comes sluicing icecold down the azalea banks,
Rinsing the ashtree roots and extinguishing
Briskly the stoked-up leaves of autumn —
Head over heels from the shallow rapids

Vaults to repose in hollow and echoing
Senjo ga hara, plain of the battlefield,
Whose larches grow mast-high in convoy,
Waiting the sea and the lift of canvas —

On through the flatland, placidly, languidly,
Lapses in pools and sinuous watermeads
Until the rock staircases trip it
Into the finest of falling curtains —

Sucked down a smoothbored slithering channelbed,
Pistoning on, it breaks into ribbonry
Sputters of spray, high-pressure spume-jets
Forced from the shaft of the even current —

Spurting to meet its terminus-estuary,
Shobu ga hama, shore of the irises,
Beside a tree-hung, watching water,
Eye of the mountains, aloof Chuzénji.

2. The Lake

Gleaming Chuzénji, your lapis lazuli
Mirror reflects the mass of the numinous
Pyramid Nan Tai San — so often
Woken to life in a festal twilight

By drums and candles winding in pilgrimage —
Reflects the gliding torches of fishermen
Beneath the mist-enveloped summits:
Ideographs, but opaque and nameless.

Character-peaks, calligrapher's waterfall,
Packed full of sense for master-interpreters,
Tempt but defy the ambitious tyro,
Not yet a Sinologue skilled to read them.

Winter Sunset

The sense of gloom and mystery and space.
The trailing twilight that, with nightfall here,
Delays on the island peaks, and from their place
Beyond the darkening channel brings them near;
While, half a province distant, walls and towers,
Embalmed with amber by a lingering sun,
Are lapped in gold against the dusk that lowers
In further vastnesses where daylight's done.
The Sea Road glimmering on its broken way
Over the mountains in the hush that seems
A conch to enfold all that the enormous bay
Is whispering to the ocean's liquid gleams.
The loom of shadowy governments that are
Locked in the sovereignty of one full star.

In Celebration of the Haiku

Western Script

Characters of Holland
strung out line ahead
like wild geese in the sky¹.

So'in (1605—1682)

The Frog

An old pond
a frog jumping in
water going plomp².

Basho (1644—1694)

¹In the seventeenth century Japan's main contact with Europe was through a small Dutch trading settlement at Nagasaki. Contrasted with the vertical arrangement of their own characters, the horizontal Western script (*Oranda no moji*, characters of Holland) struck the Japanese as wildly strange and exotic; the poet could only come to terms with it by comparing it to a classic Japanese image — the skein of geese.

²“Cette poésie célèbre évoque admirablement la paix d'un monastère japonais, avec son vieil étang, couvert de lotus, dont le silence n'est rompu que par la plongée d'une grenouille, de temps à autre.” Michel Revon, *Anthologie de la Littérature Japonaise*, Paris, 1910.

Personally I can do without Monsieur Revon's Loti-esque lotus, and prefer to let the famous onomatopoeia speak, or rather plomp, for itself:

*Furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto.*

POEMS OF THE WAR

The Dream

(Lines written during internment in Japan)

The warden of the fortress
That looks across the straits
Sits in the water tower
And gravely calculates.

His floor is paved with water,
Water five storeys deep,
And nothing breaks the vigil
That clocks and dials keep.

The warden guards the passage
And has it in control
To make the seas magnetic
Round every spit and shoal.

An ironclad is passing,
A stranger, through the field.
She wears no jack or ensign;
No name adorns her shield.

No man appears aboard her
From turret or barbette.
By hands within the armour
Her onward course is set.

The smoke slips from her funnels
Soft as the fleece of lamb,
And soundlessly the ripples
Sparkle around her ram.

The ironclad is gliding
Through the mysterious straits,
And in his tower the warden,
The mathematician, waits.

Towards Mozambique

In peacetime winters, I remember best
Pacing the cold beach on a brilliant day,
With bouncing waves all sparkle to the west
In the crisp wind that whips Sagami Bay,
And lifting clouds across the sea that stray
Leisurely upward over the smooth ice
Of Fuji's cone, and after them the play
Of shadows rising, and you feel, how nice
To cut this wedding cake and crunch it slice by slice.

Nearby, the thicker sucking of the tide
Within the landlocked Abura-Tsubo,
The Jar of Oil, which scarcely seems to slide
Inside its case of rock (though breakers go
Smashing beyond) would make you think the slow
And viscous waters cooked to some strange glue
Despite the bitter day, the pulse is so
Grossly lethargic in their tepid brew,
A saucepan seething up with a fat greasy stew.

We loved the shore which ends the universe,
Where the peninsula, so wild and rough
And switchback-bumpy, breaks to its converse,
The dim Pacific, stretched like faded stuff
From shore to horizon, taut and flat enough
To be of paper, frail to the fingertips,
Except where, hulldown to the east, a puff
Of woolly smoke, drawn from the crater lips,
Betrays the block of ore from which it slowly slips:

Oshima's isle, rocked by Mihara's fires,
Warning to mariners, seamark by day,
At night a fitful flame that flares and tires,
The unwatched lamp that leads into the Bay—
Imai no hama, beach where the interplay
Of time and luck were for a moment such
That happiness for me was coiled away,
Taken for granted, brushed with casual touch,
As a thing preordained that didn't count for much.

II

Wakening, I watched a bundle tightly packed
That scaled with clockwork jerks a nearby staff.
Hoist to the top, I saw it twitched and racked
And shrugged and swigged, until the twists of chaff
That held it to the halyard broke, and half
Released the packet, then a sharper tease
Tore something loose, and with its smacking laugh
The Jack was thrashing furiously down breeze,
Mocking the feeble stops that lately cramped its ease.

This was my frontispiece for Tokyo,
The flimsy symbol flauntingly unfurled,
Rippling transparent in the winds that blow
Under the grey sky of an alien world,
Lonelier than ever pipe that hummed or skirled
From rock or straits, desert or frontier keep.
And upward in my waking mind there swirled
London, the war, the separating deep—
A fine way to emerge from the maquis of sleep!

Guns in the West. Across the enormous space,
The European, the Siberian plain,
The Japan Sea, whose sky-coloured surface
You guess from mountains, where the rougher grain
Ends in a line of snow, a curving stain
Against what lies beyond, a blanker white—
As if it carried, we would stop and strain
To catch their whisper in the hurrying bright
Hubbub of high midday or the suspense of night.

In the hotel, the usual come and go
Of toughs and beauties, spies of the police
Or of the Kempei, or the Gestapo,
Brings up a colleague in the arts of peace—
The monocle, the smile, the trouser-crease
The same as ever, but the voice is hard—
Says 'Pétain a demandé l'armistice,
On m'a téléphoné de l'Ambassade.'
Tableau of diplomats, in a deadpan charade.

That night, as guests, we had to celebrate
The signing of some technical accord,
Forgotten now, already out of date
Before the party's opening drink was poured.
We liked our hosts, as far as you'd afford
To like the man you dealt with day to day,
Bluffing with flimsy stick his rattling sword.
'How's your old Empire?' cynically they
Would ask. 'And your One Roof?' with mock
concern we'd say.

Yanagibashi, Willow Bridge, the scene
Of our strange beano, is a print of old
Coloured Yedo. Harunobu had been
Fond of the paper windows that unfold
On Sumida, whose shifty waters hold
The rising moon. Below you can discern
A man who poles, as Utamaro told,
His craft by a dim lantern in the stern
While up the stream and down the teahouse
 windows burn.

Climbing with shoeless feet the polished stairs,
Gay were the evenings in that house I'd known.
The mats are swept, the cushions that are chairs
Surround the table like a lacquer throne.
The geisha have been booked by telephone,
The whisky brought, the raw fish on the ice,
The green tea boiled, the saké in its stone
Warmed to a turn, and seaweed, root and spice
Await their last repose, the tub of nutcrisp rice.

The scene is set, and soon a wall will slide,
And in will run, professional as hell,
Our geisha team, brisk as a soccer side.
We'll ask the ones we like, if all goes well,
To luncheon at a suitable hotel,
And friendship, once begun, will not look back.
Meanwhile the blood is thrilling like a bell
For we are strong and feel the lusty smack
Of youth, and all the Scotch that waits for us to crack.

And yet tonight the scene is cold and stale,
The whisky raw, insipid the saké,
Loathsome the seaweed, nauseous root and kale,
Stodgy the rice as in our nursery day.
The geisha haven't anything to say
But wait like London debbs to be amused—
You feel that their mamas have had to pay—
And in their Pompadours you'd be confused
To guess just where begins the horsehair that they've used.

The evening withers in the bitter chill
That breathes from the disasters in the West.
The news of France's fall seems to instil
One thought in every patriotic breast.
Geisha neglects her client, host his guest,
And all forget retort and song and act
In whispered strategy. (To us the best
Of our well-wishers, shortly to be tracked,
Whispers that Stahmer's here, and soon there'll
be a pact.)

That evening glowed the richest flower of all,
Rose of the teahouse, sumptuous Chioko.
I had been ready, at her lightest call
(Her strange and southern glance obsessed me so),
Renouncing home and friends and work, to go
And live with her beside the misty seas.
But now I spoke, she smiled, it was as though
The sound still carried, but a rising breeze
Had snatched out all the sense. My flower was Japanese.

III

There is a hollow eaten in the bone
Of high Japan, where, far above the loud
And sweltering city, prefectures of stone
Build in the silence of bamboo and cloud.
Here, in the dead of summer, came the crowd
Of Embassies, Legations, all the corps,
And crammed the mountain waters, shroud to shroud,
With racing craft, small coracles that bore
The bunting of the Powers, formal as men-of-war.

On waters of the world the starboard tack
Has right of passage. But an Attaché
On Lake Chuzénji finds his future black
Unless he is contented to give way
To any Acting Interim Chargé
Approaching on the port tack, and to shun,
Working as close to windward as he may,
Each Consul-General passing on the run,
Nor luff an *Excellence* before the starting gun.

In incidents the international pond
Was never lacking. Diplomats would here
Stake everything they could, their word, their bond,
Seniors their mission, juniors their career.
It took a Chef de Protocole to steer
A faultless race, for only he'd be able
To get the laws of precedence quite clear
And give the helmsmen each his proper label,
And never on the course forget the dinner-table.

This was the world in which we had to work.
Fixed at our post, forbidden to resign,
We, from Chuzénji, could but watch Dunkirk.
Then, as a fuller moon began to shine
Over the saddles of the mountain spine,
The very stillness seemed to throb and ache.
Heaven forbid that *there* the night's so fine
Or this the invasion moon—Our thoughts must take
Wing to the Straits and leave our bodies by the Lake.

Cooling our fever with its wavering jet,
Into the dark there steals a wooden flute—
A bamboo's essence, fresh and dense and wet,
The inmost core of pole and brush and root,
Distilled in drops that nothing can dilute—
So sings the *shakuhachi*, full and round,
Each note complete and juicy as a fruit.
And, far away, the only other sound
Is where the huge cascade falls whispering underground.

IV

Outside the iron gates, the buglers went
Blowing a springy quickstep, then a pair
Of mounted leaders, formal and intent,
And then a column, marching, marching—where?
Their get-up has an empire-snatching air,
Shirts for the jungle, helmets for the sun.
Not ours the empire anyway, for there
They'll find the fighter and the coastal gun
And fortress Singapore, the pride of '41.

Climbing the gangway when my leave allowed,
I waved to Furukawa on the quay.
The pocket chauffeur squashed his cap and bowed.
'Danna, come safely back, across the sea.'
I liked him for the way he dreamt that he,
Driving my car, at the decisive hour
(Paranoiac, as chauffeurs tend to be)
Of Tsushima, was smashing Russia's power
With salvoes of cordite, from Togo's conning-tower.

The tour was strange. See Herculaneum
Before the lava. See the brave Shanghai
Grown shrill and febrile. See the coolies come
Hurrying past the foreign Banks that lie
Longside the foreign cruisers. See them ply
With straining hearts between the rickshaw wheels.
'Of course, old man, it hits one in the eye,
But actually it looks worse than it feels,
And anyway it earns good money and square meals.'

Come to the Club, explore the Tiffin Belt,
The world where bars are long and drinks are short,
Where gin and whisky variously are spelt
Pahit and stengah, and the Treaty Port
Parades the drinkers of its special sort,
Their faces Treaty-party from excess,
And pickled as the walnut. One more snort,
One gimlet more, and we must go and dress
And hasten to the realms of the Shanghai duchesse.

‘Le tennis, ce jeu tellement middle-class,’
Drawls the duchesse, whose European start,
Whose Deauville background manages to pass
For all that’s feudal in this distant part.
The locals thought she couldn’t be more smart,
And prized admission to her little fêtes,
And searched through *Gotha* with a beating heart,
But vainly, for the names of her estates,
And for the strange device emblazoned on her plates.

Around us in the tower the Shanghai set
Politely jog to whining saxophones.
The locals are severe on etiquette,
And precedence is marrow in their bones.
But far downstream the lighted blocks and cones
With which the Settlement bestars the sky
Make a tiara set with sparkling stones.
A mirage that can only signify:
Here’s luxury, here’s hell, here’s heaven, here’s Shanghai

Close to the Garden Bridge, the arms of Britain
 Mark where our Consul lives in civic state
 And, steadfast as a legionary in Lytton,
 (Suppose Pompeii had had a Consulate)
 A Highland sentry guards the cyphered gate,
 Whom kilt, glengarry, sporran, skean-dhu,
 And brass and pipeclay tightly insulate
 Against the Bund and all its bustling crew,
 As if the Tay flowed by, and not the gross Whangpoo.

The Garden Bridge: a garden bare of flowers,
 A bridge constructed only to divide;
 The unsettled Settlement, the powerless Powers,
 One side the creek, and on the other side
 Across the bridge, a moment's rickshaw ride,
 Is Nippon's empire, China of Nanking,
 Where the New Order rages far and wide,
 The land where 'dangerous thought's a dangerous thing,
 Where Tokyo cracks the whip and Kempei rules the ring.

But when I left, July of '41,
 A tense excitement marked the sweltering day.
 In Tokyo they'd shot off a warning gun.
 Reservists from abroad were on the way
 To join their depots. Where the steamer lay
 The wharf was packed, and as a nagging band
 With brass-ass rhetoric began to bray,
 One heard the flick come rhythmic from the land
 Of paper flags that flipped and fell in every hand.

Locked in my cabin, anxiously I checked
Amid the escape of brass, the hoot of steam,
And found my numbered sacks were all correct.
Slowly the ship was warped into the stream.
The flags, the cheers, the chant of alien theme,
Blood-orange faces, blank as any wall—
I knew the episode must be a dream,
The noise, the hostile troopship—fiction all.
Only the bag was real, the courier from Whitehall.

‘Danna, come safely back across the sea,’
Had been, three weeks ago, my man’s farewell.
And so, at length, I did. But where was he?
Amongst the other drivers, silence fell.
Where Furukawa’d gone to, none could tell.
No sign was left to point, no trace to show,
Towards Manchuria, China, heaven or hell;
One thing was sure, was all there was to know:
My friend was mobilized, absorbed into the foe.

Instead, against the brick of Tokyo station—
Symmetrical and brown as Kensington Gore—
A conqueror to his high destination
Was clopping, back from China and the war,
In a road landau, model nineteen-four.
The sword, the white glove at the képi’s peak—
You felt a system frozen just before
The Dreadnought era, a forgotten chic
Preserved in books and toys, but, in the flesh, unique.

Behind, a straggle of lancers clinked and bumped
In sweatgrey khaki, and the landau rolled
Towards the palace, jolted, crashed and thumped—
For the triumphal way was badly holed.
To paint the swarming life, so rich, so old,
'Ideographic' is the word you'd choose.
Women with babies pouched inside a fold
Behind their backs (inverted kangaroos)
Are hurrying with the squeak and chop of wooden shoes.

Somnambulistic cyclists, heads piled high
With tiers of balanced soupbowls, weave and swerve.
A three-wheeled truck, its chassis broken by
The enormous weight of what must surely serve
Inside a cruiser as the central nerve,
Blocking the road with its ungainly mass,
Holds up a motor hearse, whose every curve,
Carved by some unknown Buddhist Pheidias,
Looms in hieratic teak through wisps of charcoal gas.

A daily paper's building shows a belt
On which, by lighted characters that glide
From right to left, the morning's news is spelt.
The traveller has no choice but to decide,
The East reveals all its most Eastern side,
Aping the West, and grows ten times more strange.
A steady public stops to see them slide,
Those ancient signs of esoteric range—
Compact of met. reports, and of the stock exchange.

VI

December. Telephones that ring and ring.
A message half-decyphered, dropped, destroyed.
Through stolid streets, that do not show a thing,
A last excursion in the outer void.
Then gates are barred, and we are all employed
In burning, burning, everything must burn.
The aged archivist is quite annoyed
To see his paper years, each in its turn,
Smoking away unwept, and for the ash no urn.

We stood like the spectators of a reel
That in slow motion flickered out our fate,
Bound hand and foot by nightmare; we could feel
Already round our necks the numbing weight
Of long internment. Yet with time our state
Grew more familiar, and we came to joke
About the cold, and the receding date
Of freedom, and the Scot who turned to smoke
A Board of Trade index, with cards instead of coke.

Shipwreck, reverse, catastrophe and rout,
In that lean winter all headlines were bad,
Yet on Malaya's fortress holding out
We fixed our hope, or all the hope we had.
And then it fell. That night an ironclad,
Intensely lit in a prophetic dream,
Like a strange message on a signal-pad
(Transcribed elsewhere),* was seen to make full steam
Through estuary or straits or narrowing tidal stream.

And I was in a castle on the shore,
And guessed the foe from her pre-Dreadnought mould,
And knew with certainty, ungrasped before,
Our keep, across the straits, would safely hold,
But that some horror, hitherto untold,
Waited the stranger from a charge concealed.
And suddenly she seemed forlorn and old,
Doomed by the nameless ones within the shield,
the flagless ironclad caught in the gridded field.

Neurotic figment of the overwrought
It seems today, yet in the world of Zen
And tautened nerves my obsolete Dreadnought
Was like glad tidings from beyond our ken.
But soon comes a more solid comfort, when
Exploding bombs forestall the siren's moo,
Smoke rises near and far, bombs crash again,
And *stars* appear at noon: 'out of the blue'
Was never, for good news, a term so aptly true.

Time passed. A tramcar screaming in the dark
Velvet of blackout down the Kudan hill
Strikes, out of wire, spark on cascading spark,
Lights from below the cherry swags that spill,
In all the thickness of the rich April,
Their pink festoons of flower above the street,
Creamy as paint new-slapped. I looked my fill,
Amazed to find our world was so complete.
Such moments, in the nick, are strange and sharply sweet.

But then the season moistened and grew dank
And misty with young leaves, and dim and slack,
The filtering light diffused, as in a tank
Where seaweed waves, and an enormous black
Swallowtail came flapping forth and back
Giddily hiccuping from flower to flower,
Sad as a widowed dipsomaniac;
And our forebodings felt the impending shower
Weigh like the stroke of noon as hands approach the hour.

In the green dining room the day was dark
With an aquarium dimness, and we heard
A heavy raindrop fall and make its mark
On the hot flags, another, then a third.
'The Nyūbai has begun'—a sitting bird
Too easy for the Colonel to miss,
Man of the striped tie and the native word.
To prove him right, came the decisive hiss
Of rainsheets spilling down on sun-warmed terraces.

VII

Eight months were up. Too numbing even to amaze
Release had come, and like a thundercloud
The coasts of Idzu quivering in the haze
Hid what was left of Nippon, nor allowed
Imai no hama's face to pierce the shroud,
Imai no hama, that escapist sand.
And on the deck the lean, bedraggled crowd,
Jostling the rails, with hardly room to stand,
Looked seaward to the west and quite ignored the land.

Halfway across, the waters grow opaque
And lose their sparkle, and stream thickly by
As rich as bouillabaisse with the intake
Of soil milled from the furthest and most dry
Recesses of mid-Asia, far's the cry,
By violent Yangtse with its churning head.
Upstream we glimpse a new, unknown Shanghai:
No smoke, no ships, a slumbering river bed,
A silhouette as grave as Angkor, and as dead.

After Shanghai, the brilliant Singapore,
White as Italian cities by Corot—
The early Corot, not yet grown a bore—
Hard, sparkling architectures carved in snow;
So firm is every tower, so round and so
Compact each dome. But when the thunder-ships
Loom in the sky, the scene is El Greco:
Sinister, luminous, as in eclipse,
Toledo-Singapore awaits the Apocalypse.

As we steamed further West, a flying boat
Of the imperial navy circled round
To check our course and take a final note.
Then all was solitude, and we were bound
By the blank skyline of Tom Tiddler's ground,
The liquid heaving no man's land that lay
Between the battle fleets, and all the sound
To hear was churn of turbines, swish of spray,
And aft the logline sagged, and spun the knots away.

No circumnavigators ever came
Gladder towards Mozambique. But there grew
Queasy in us, while still at sea, the same
Fear of today that Rip van Winkle knew.
Men are such egoists, when they've been through
Enough sensations in a given plot—
Love, suffer, yawn, no matter what you do—
So long as it recalls your private lot,
Remembrance makes of school or prison a beauty-spot.

Through the round ports the watery afternoon
Throws, on the ceiling, rays that swirl and gleam,
Rippling reflections, transient as the moon,
A biograph that flickers like a dream,
And the small cabin lights with the dim beam
Of lantern images that shift and shake,
And all the harm goes fading down the stream:
Hate and despair and boredom and heartbreak,
Slipping astern and lost in the impermanent wake.

Tokyo 1942 — London 1946.

Elegy

To Duncan Johnston, who was killed leading a Royal Marine Commando raid on the Burma Coast, the night of February 22nd 1945.

I

Oh evening hour when arms of the sea
are ponds that the tide is tilting dry,
and the buoys at the edge of the middle ground
are scarlet bobbins that strain to hold
the ebbstream's white and twisted reel
wound off taut from their labouring spool:
in the channel's bath the darkness runs
and lights are beginning to jump and bounce,
from the Bembridge Ledge and Saint Helen's Fort
to Jack in the Basket and Egypt Point.
Far off in childhood our bedroom wall
reflected the lightship over the shoal
whose phrases, punched in occulting tape,
dictated the whole night long to our sleep.
Cryptic refrains, returning in dream
they find me today, and move me the same.

II

Winds in the east channel
tumble and spin the soft
hair of smoke from funnel
spraying it all adrift.

Wind in the roads a bugle
and mounted in telescope's disc
the liberty-morning signal
linen on barrack brick.

Fixed by the lens and flattened
a cockle of varnished hull
half way here to the island
slope of feather and shell

sliver of glass and shaving
of water under the stem
planed up stiff and unmoving
as sail and steersman and helm.

Glittering boyhood-weather
pucker and lop of Spithead
and the spaces of the passage
sluiced down clean as a deck.

Days of dance and sparkle
steady the airs that will reach
him back for the messroom candle
soldier's wind from the east.

III

Summer of cracked glasshouses
where bluebottles read their text
loud in the hush of haunting
over gardens of neglect.

Sweatiness of the raspberry
slithering down its cone,
limpness of redcurrants
rotting to be strung,

the gooseberry tight and furtive,
warm and bulging-veined,
and suddenly its sack is bursting
with childhood's violent taste.

How shopsoiled and musty
the bracken in all the hard
luxuriance of midsummer
and how the birds are tired,

how lethargic their business,
and how their talk has lost
spring's spurt and brilliance
under the heat's arrest.

Never for constancy, the intention
of the brutal hot spell—
it's meant for love's first passion
or first grief for the dead.

IV

At night in the shooting lodge, images of the dead
visited the granite lantern where I lay;
for this was the first summer of the peace
when such were still at large. And in my dream
the dead are home on embarkation leave,
in fuss of packing comes the usual question:
“where can we get you after you’ve gone back?”
And I who know departure to be final
dread what reply may come, forestall my brother
with reassuring wisdom of civilians
who know a Service answer: “Oh, *Warspite*
will always find him.” Our mother and the rest
accept as something obvious but forgotten
the code address. Tension as in childhood days
is well played down—the secret expedition
treated as start of term at a new school.
But then perception’s knife-thrust makes me see
her question as an act, that she and I
share the same vision and are neither of us
fooled by the dead with their leave and their embarkation.

Suddenly my light was burning and my pillow
blubbered from crying and nothing was there
except outdoors the indifferent swish and sluice
of the uncorked stout-black torrent in the meadow.
And still the tears
seeped from the flask of bone and left behind
a crust that proved their body. On the hill
the night was breathless with the wit of owls.

I dozed again, and found my turret held
warmth from a recent presence, and the wall
was screen to a dim vacillating light,
a flickering page with substance to decypher,
a signal from the dead, despatched at sea
in the eastern passage, whose plain text proposed
more rendezvous to keep, for me in dream,
for him on permit from the further shore.

V

Touchingly through the darkness
you houses of the west
shine for the brief deserter
from the barracks of the dead.

In death's first movement
we living it is who die
and the dead who in our bosom
stay piercingly alive.

What shocks is our own limp,
the amputation of self,
the drag of the phantom limb,
the sudden nerveless bulk

of so much shared experience
hanging heavy as a memoir,
gone dead as reminiscence
from pens of the retired.

What stings is the poisoned sharpness
of the revisited scene,
the headlands sore with lacquer,
the woods that smart under paint.

How heartbreaking the brilliance
of oaks in the watered green
and shantung yellow of their canvas
as if at the flash of a gun

they were ready to up anchor
and float away off the wind
under their cavernous spinnakers
of bellying parachute silk.

VI

But one day the switches are over,
the freshness fades and the pain
and pitiable in a new movement
the dead in us are dying.

A film of dullness eclipses
the Chinese eye of grief
and all the lacquer of strangeness
is stripped from shore and sea.

The raw tones of London
the chimneysweeper's black
the livid yellow of Palladian
the poison-ivy of the park

come in for a final dimming
to the flatness of everyday
and all that was crude and tingling
is stewed to a tasteless meal.

The lamps are out on the island
the lightship is towed from its ledge
the flickering text is silent
no message in dreams from the dead,

no soldier's wind to bowl him
on a rail for the keels of craft
here at noon and back for the bugle
along the grooves of glass.

VII

Here is the tragic essence, this belated
This posthumous demise, when to our sense
Recollection's dated wizardry runs out
And our continuing loyalty is emptied
Of all emotion. Only through the hard
Shaft-face of self-esteem parsimonious tears
Are oozing, sour distillate from the core
Of iron shame, the shame of private failure
Shown up by the completeness of the dead.
I wrote in the fierce hope of bursting loose
From this regime, cracking its discipline,
Smashing the barrack locks, and rolling out
Once more the track that ran across the glass.
I wrote, but my intense assertion found
No substance and no echo, and all I did
Was raise an empty monument to grief.

HOME FROM THE EAST

The Castle on the Ledge

Far beyond sight's conceiving
Up in the eye of the wind,
Shadow on skies of evening,
Tower at the fairway's bend:

Glass can discern your needle
Lodged like a wavering bone
Deep in the jaws of the channel,
Splitting the winds to a tune.

Birchwoods of the Muick

In the liquid autumn
Fullness of the Muick;
Ash a-sparkle with berries,
Shallow floods that pick

Round the pebbled boulders
Their deliberate way;
Softness of the birchwoods
Weeping down in spray

Over the puddling water's
Line of engraved steel,
Over the falls that trundle,
Smooth as a turbine-wheel;

And the powdered fragrance
Midsummer exhaled
Changed to a honeycomb roughness,
Coarse and waxen-scaled,

Breath of the September
Garden by the stream,
Blown from gold and amber
And the imperial gleam.

From the exotic maple's
Taut vermilion tent
Watch, dryfoot, the rainjets
Faltering, almost spent,

Falling with a lightness,
With a switched-off power,
Lifted as by parachute:
The exit of the shower;

Slow as the retarded
Fizzling downward drifts
From the exploded rocket—
Till the raincloud lifts

And on the deliberate
Waters of the Muick
A single drop falls smartly:
Smack of a rocket-stick.

Estuary in Scotland

The northlands by dutchlight
are pearl to the gullseye
the breeze from the river
a stairsweep for pigeons.

The breadwork of harvest
gives crust to the partridge
and the slicings of autumn
are wheels in the oakwood.

SONNETS AND SHORT POEMS

Homage to Andrew Marvell

Marvell, in cast of mind at home
As firmly in Horatian Rome
As in your own Whitehall;
Inheritor of all

That either city has to give;
For whom the grand Augustans live
As fellows with the great
Of Cromwell's principate;

Official draftsman, yours to frame
In Latin structure England's aim
And, Milton-like, afford
A pen to aid the sword

Fairfax and the Protector wield;
Yours to restore the wasted field
And in distress or health
To serve the Commonwealth;

Yet with a wider-sweeping eye
To range above the land, and spy
The virtue and defect
Of empires, to detect

In vanquished causes, and in kings
Dethroned, the tragedy of things,
And know what joys reside
Where the Bermudas ride.

Yours to examine as you go
London and Rome outspread below,
And, soaring, yours to find
The empire of the mind.

Sounding Song

Our lead is armed with tallow
To sound for rock and sand,
For the seas we sail are shallow
And wash uncharted land.

The waters here are pale
And barely mask the mesh
Of clay and stones and shale,
The bones below their flesh.

Slung from the shrouds, I hollo
The reading of the lead,
For the channel that we follow
Runs between shoals we dread.

The water's knife-thin sliver
Of glass lies over the ground,
A pane our keel would shiver
If I should cease to sound.

The seas we sail are shallow
And wash uncharted land,
So our lead is armed with tallow
To sound for rock and sand.

Echo Sonnet

To linger in the pale saloons of sleep,
Before the screen where enigmatic stills
Or mimic shadows flicker for a space
In a green dusk, as of eclipse at noon,
While solemn drums beat slowly, and a bell
Is urgent in the mansion's furthest cell;
To linger there, for me is late or soon
To ask what lantern burns within the case
Of that close chamber where the whirling spools,
Silent as planets, their swift vigil keep.
An answer comes, half-glimpsed, in moments rare:
Rarely a panel slides, a shutter falls,
And stab of sheer magnesium brilliance calls
A voiceless cry from him who lingers there.

The Strongroom

Behind the dial that moves in silent round
Its numbered face against the numbered rose,
The cogs prepare their calculated part
And stealthy tumblers wait the sign to close;
Until, the group of sovereign figures found,
The lock within its algebraic heart
Is touched to a predictable remorse
And yields to cyphers what it bars from force.

Our hearts are set to similar equations
Of trifles in a trifling order ranged.
The weakness of the human strongroom lies
In that too facile use will compromise
The virtue of the hidden permutations
Which can in locks, but not in hearts, be changed.

Abstract of Persia

Horizon of bony saddles salt with snow.
Snow rubbed in all the pleats of the brown foothills,
Rump of the fleshless backbone range of Media.
Ink-blue shadows of cloud at rest on the slopes,
Bare, powdered birches and white boles of poplar,
Slender as columns on the balconies
Of the water-garden palaces of Isfahan.
The glaucous torrent licking through the snowbeds,
Sucking the boulders iced from winter's tube,
Or tumbling where the tightening waterfall
Holds the fine drawnwork in its formal grooves.
And then, across the width of Kurdistan,
Exposed in the sweep of the unwinding pass,
Crusader castles of granite, plumbline-ruled,
Hard, fluted mountains, carved in cuneiform
With lapidary triumphs of the Achaemenids.

The Painted Tombs

Somewhere between the eruptive skin of desert
pimpled with warts and blackheads of basalt,
and all the dripping chocolate, soupy green
and vinous purple of the valley's quilt,
deepdown from sight a freakish underworld
painted in royal Thebes's private idiom
burrows in tunnel, pipe and forking tube.
Unspent and fresh inside their coat of cypher
the pictures throb with meaning: in the lodge
of rock that held a shadowy Ramessid,
reputed an astrologer, the ceiling
flames with zodiacal signs, so many lamps
steady with the strong fuel of correctness—
but to the sense the effect is of a chime,
faint and unearthly, a thimble resonance.
More often comes the deeper-throated clang
of a foreboding gong struck at midnight
in an unsounded shaft, as when Anubis
the jackalheaded, stooping to embalm
the shrouded sovereign, comes in apprehension
straight from the heart of horror. See the hawk
and cobra sporting the united crown
of kingdoms where the course of majesty
is plotted by the sinister and the tragic:
dynasties beforehand, preview of Macbeth.

The Last Evening

From the German of Rainer Maria Rilke

And night, and distant wheels; beyond the park
the army's echelons in endless train
were rumbling forward in the summer dark.
He looked up from the keyboard, played again,
and in her gaze, as in a glass, he found
his own young features and the grief they wore.
He played, and knew his melancholy more
seductive-sweet with every chiming sound.
Then suddenly the image blurred, the whole
dissolved: she stood and battled to control
and stay the crowding tumult in her breast.
His playing faltered. Through the window stole
a coolness. And how strange on that console
stood the black shako with the skull for crest.

Footnote to Housman

To reach the top flight as a poet
you must write an unreadable work,
so obscure that your friends will forgo it
and all but the bravest will shirk.

Then the few who have read it, begrudging
the waste of exertion entailed,
will claim it's essential for judging
how far you've succeeded or failed.

From admiring their own persistence
they'll come to admiring the screed
and claim that it stands at a distance
from works that are easy to read;

while the reader who skipped it is able
to pretend he enjoyed it himself,
and leave it about on his table,
and show it with pride on his shelf.

It was Housman who worst neglected
the force of this critical rule,
with result that his faults are detected
by infants who read him at school,

while we who admire him, defenceless,
lack some *pompier* twaddle to quote
and can find nothing prolix or senseless
to claim as the best thing he wrote.

To learn from the fault he committed
is the first of poetical cares.
Lucid intervals may be admitted,
but be lucid the whole time who dares.

POSTCARDS FROM SPAIN

For Bernard Spencer

Window Life

From my *despacho* I get an oblique look
along the façade of brilliantly sunlit
quite hideous blocks of flats. This is Madrid
and we know intimately the characters
who pop out of certain boxes; they all seem
to have no possible existence at street-level.
There's someone high up in the redbrick tower
who stares and stares, whenever we lunch out
on our small terrace, with such concentration,
he must be keeping a dossier of what we eat;
so that if we have something out of the ordinary—
like cuttlefish in its own ink — we're tempted
to hold it up so he can see it clear.

There's a blue girl who — up there — looks a treat,
and a shabby old number with a waterfall moustache
and an ancestor in armour precisely hung
where probing eyes can't miss him. At the far end
of the perspective, further than you'd suppose
in the sharp air, a carpenter on the roof
is hammering, and the bang of his hammer is late,
comes when he lifts it, so you think he's knocking
at something soft and viscous which goes plop.

On this cold April day I see our life
pay out in front of us its slippery rope—
yet, for a moment, everything is held,
engines are stopped, the future's in suspense.

Casa de Campo

Nobody's here but an occasional guard
complete in leather with his horn and gun.
Across the stream, the city begins in blankness
and whiteness and rectangularity,
the bungled cubism special to Madrid.
But here, the arrested stillness of the park:
less than a mile off, an enormous capital
is hanging; from the Estación del Norte
in front of us a tower of white smoke climbs;
but here there's not a sound, it is the silence
not of deep country, but of birdless desert.

Two Bays

Palma at First Light

Over the smooth plain crossed by oily smears
of snailtrack, tiny fisher-boats are rowing
with the calm haste of ants. The harbour's dwarfed
by a cathedral in pink Gothic that
sits over the mastheads like a marine rock-crystal.

Pollensa at Nightfall

Westward the capes and mountains are uniformed
blueblack on lemon; but look east, and find
the day with all its colour-range surviving
in spectral faintness: walls of rosy stone,
and houses white in woods of evergreen
and the floating gauziness of almond-flower—
an abstract shore existing by reflection
off the flat shaving-mirror of the sea.

Chipiona Light

Happiness in the present is proverbial
for wearing thick disguise. Yet there's a trick
of recognition; an experience
may hold no special pleasure at the time
but already, if one knows to look out for it,
there sits on the palate a fullness of body
which — though still tasteless — in wine-merchant
shop
goes off with a round finish.

The nightshift
were forking heavy bunches into the crushers
and on the sea there was a patch of moon
past the wide glacis of the vineyards and
on the half-minute Chipiona was flashing
with the calm directional authority
of a great Atlantic lighthouse, intimate
in the next paddock. Through exhaustion's film
and the annoyance of too many impressions
we sensed: here's something that will go off happy.

The Pillars

For most of October the house is in the clouds. We can see Gibraltar, and occasionally a ship glimpsed far below is painted with sunlight as if in a different world. At times, beyond the passage, the Monkey Mountain, Hercules' second pillar, shows us its humped outline, or perhaps in the afternoon the sun has found some of its corrugations. Then the weather shuts in, we catch the drift of foghorns.

But

this evening it has cleared, and the white works of ships bound homeward through the Straits are lit to brilliance, the whole scene is wistful, tragic. Across in Africa the waterfront of Ceuta has heroic definition — lighthouse, barbettes and casemates, and in the middle a matchbox-skyscraper whose windows are exactly countable. The Monkey Mountain has whizzed towards us as through a zoom-lens and stands there at arm's length, solid and wrinkled and unmistakeable, like an old, old celebrity. Along the narrow river that lies between, the ships go floating by, their national colours in the sun so bright, so small and touchingly pathetic, it seems a slice of world as it could look to God. Tonight Gibraltar, outline still precise as thousands and thousands of pinprick lights come up on it, is a fortress by Fabergé.

Three mules in tandem lump a hooded cart
with guns and sausage and wine and cartridges.
Snow in between the stalks of the stubble field
is sugar on breakfast food. A scrubbish hill
has a farmhouse on top set in the middle
of a disc of snow, a toy on a round stand.
Beyond the hill stick up some jagged bits
of iced sierra.

On his white horse we saw
the head beater riding down from the farmhouse
about an hour away. The show was sun
on ice. With a cardboard cartridge-box
we cracked a fire, and threw on it great branches
of scrub-holly and incense-burning cistus.
On the holly leaves small gobs of snow turned grey,
then melted into the festive, cackling flame.
It fetched the neighbouring guns across to warm
and gossip — till horns and raving dogs advised us
the beaters were coming. So we doused the blaze,
and soon the evening-dress magpies got up
and sauntered over, then partridges galore
arrived in squadrons, gliding across the scrub,
and thumped to earth, or planed away to safety
as if borne up on thermals.

One horn-blast,
then, from the cart, came cheese and spiced *chorizo*,
and wine jerked from the skin. Our neighbour poured
whisky from a flask onto a partridge-breast
and made a mudpie of it from the wet
red earth, then baked it, mud and all, in one
of the perfumed cistus-fires, and spiked us both
a sliver. It tasted just like any partridge —
but underdone. We said it was a marvel.

THE ARREST OF ANTONITO EL CAMBORIO ON THE ROAD TO SEVILLA

Antonio Torres Heredia,
son and grandson of Camborio's,
goes to the bullfight in Sevilla
carrying a switch of osier.
Swarthy as green moonlight,
he swaggers along and idles.
His ringlets' peacock-blueing
glitters between his eyebrows.
When halfway on his journey,
he cut lemons in their roundness
and went tossing them into the water
until he turned it golden.
And when halfway on his journey,
under the boughs of an elm-tree,
Civil Guardsmen patrolling
marched him off elbow to elbow.

The day goes by so slowly,
the afternoon slung on a shoulder,
trailing its matador-flourish
over the sea and the gullies.
The olive-trees are longing
for Capricorn and his darkness,
and a small wind, on horseback,
jumps the leaden mountains.
Antonio Torres Heredia,
son and grandson of Camborio's,
without his switch of osier,
walks between five three-cornered ones.

“But Antonio, who are you?
If you were a true Camborio,
you would have opened a fountain
of blood with five spurts to it.
No, you’re the son of no one,
and no legitimate Camborio.
Dead and gone are the gypsies
who walked alone through the mountains!
Ancient daggers are shivering
under the dust, and turning.”

At nine o’clock in the evening
they put him into the dungeon,
while all the Civil Guardsmen
took a drink of limonada.
And at nine o’clock in the evening
they locked him up in the dungeon,
while the sky was gleaming
bright as a yearling’s crupper.

THE DEATH OF ANTONITO EL CAMBORIO

Loud were the voices of murder
near the Guadalquivir.
Ancient voices encircling
a deep carnation of a voice.
Over their boots he gored them
with bites of a wild boar's weight.
Soapier than the dolphin
the slips that he gave them in fight.
Enemy blood had weltered
his tie to a dark carmine,
but the others were four daggers
and he had no chance but to die.
So, when the stars were plunging
their spears in the water's grey,
and the bullocks were dreaming
Veronicas of gillyflower,
loud were the voices of murder
near the Guadalquivir.

"Antonio Torres Heredia,
Camborio hard as wire,
swarthy as green moonlight,
deep carnation of a voice:
who is it that has brought you
death by the Guadalquivir?"
"My four cousins Heredia,
children of Benamejí.
What caused them no envy in others
they envied when it was mine.
A pair of marble lockets,
shoes the colour of wine,
and a skin that has been kneaded
with oil and with *jazmín*."

“Ay, Antoñito el Camborio,
fit for an empress’ side!
Better remember the Virgin,
for you’re in a fair way to die!”
“Ay, Federico García,
call out the Civil Guard!
My waist is snapped and broken
like a stalk of Indian corn.”

Three bursts he had of bleeding
then, in profile, he died.
Living coinage whose equal
no mint in the world shall strike.
An angel came with a swagger,
put a cushion under his head,
while others of a more languid
complexion lit him a lamp.
And after the four cousins
went home to Benamejí,
voices of murder were silent
near the Guadalquivir.

THE BALLAD OF THE THREE RIVERS

The river Guadalquivír
goes between oranges and olives.
The two rivers of Granada
come down from the snow to the cornfields.

Ay, for love
gone away past all returning!

The river Guadalquivír
has a beard that glitters with garnets.
The two rivers of Granada,
one has tears and one has bloodshed.

Ay, for love
gone with the breeze's passing!

To vessels under canvas
Sevilla gives a roadway;
on the waters of Granada
sighs are the only rowers.

Ay, for love
gone away past all returning!

Guadalquivír, high tower
and wind in the orange branches.
Dauro and Geníl, small turrets
dead over pool and basin.

Ay, for love
gone with the breeze's passing!

Who can tell if the water carries
a will o' the wisp of groaning?

Ay, for love
gone away past all returning!

Carry orange-water and olives,
Andalucía, to your ocean.

Ay, for love
gone with the breeze's passing!

PLACES AND TIMES

Diplomacy in Tokyo

Diminishing perspectives of futility
extend from our sickbed on every hand.
Deck games that have no purpose or utility
are played to speed us on from land to land.
There's gossip, and Sinology, and drink,
and news, and love, and being in the know:
Patiences that annul the need to think
by spinning out time's passage still more slow.
Study's a Donkey with a trick device
that makes it endless, love's a French Blockade,
with conversation more like Liar Dice
and wit a Solitaire too seldom played.
We chase our own propeller through the seas.
Our drug's the executive of our disease.

1939.

Te Deum in Cairo Cathedral

God is a padre. Through the whirring fan
He speaks of our imperial obligations.
His vestments are hot-weather Anglican
with several rows of British decorations.

1945

Diplomatic Send-Off, or -Up

“Mais, vous savez, c’est une belle gare,”
I said to my French colleague on the quay —
or rather *quai* — the Corps being there *en masse*.
“Je ne partage pas votre avis, car
ce que je trouve beaucoup plus joli
c’est l’Estación de las Delicias.”

1950 Estación del Norte, Madrid

Air Travel in Arabia

Then Petra flashed by in a wink.
It looked like Eaton Square—but pink.

1957

Tribute from Aden

To Captain Haines, who, having fastened Aden,
its sharp new diamond, on Victoria's crown,
minus the gongs with which he should be laden,
lingers in debtor's gaol in Bombay town.
The eighteen-fifties were a thankless age.
Forty years on, the Jubilee impending,
with Empire all Sir Garnet, and the stage
disposed for glory, what a different ending!
We should have seen the Captain for his pains
transfigured as the new Conquistador.
Famous enough for London to ignore,
he'd stand, horsed, helmeted, the Viscount Haines
of Steamer Point and the Arabian Shore,
silent, upon a plinth in Kensington Gore.

1960

The Man from Public Building and Works

We asked him to furnish a flat,
got nothing but long lucubrations.
At least you could say of him that
he furnished his observations.

1965

La Carrière

Diplomatists *en poste* are household pets:
you grow attached, and bingo — we're transferred.
How much affection our short lifetime gets!
Soon we're as dead as any dog or bird.

1970

FRIENDS AND OTHERS

Reviewer Extraordinary

To Alastair Forbes

Ali, some joker said that Sert
was *Le Tiepolo du Ritz*.
Take care — or your ingenious art
will get you called *The Proust of White's*.

The Gogol of New South Wales

To Clive James

Quite an eye-opener it's been
to watch you on my telly screen.
Your entrance turns that orthodox
contraption into a Gogol-box.

On Certain Florid Chairmen of Companies

Here, Real Turtle may be seen,
Escaped from the Lord Mayor's tureen.

To Robin Fedden

*In the late 'forties Robin Fedden, author, poet, and friend,
lived, as National Trust curator, at Polesden Lacey,
where once Mrs Ronnie Greville had reigned
over her week-end guests. In the days of clothes rationing
and post-war austerity, my wife and I stayed with the Feddens;
and when we returned to London Robin sent after me a
handkerchief which I had forgotten there, with the
following lines:*

A Crippsian host, poor coupon-slave, stood torn
Twixt Honour and the daintiest Irish lawn;
A shade, 'twas Greville's, murmured in his ear,
"There *was* a time when guests were sacred here!"

I wrote back as follows:

Lacy from Polesden, laundered, perfumed, dressed,
The rag rejoins its owner, much impressed
To observe how that Edwardian Prince, the Devil,
Obeys the ukase of Mrs Ronnie Greville.

Dinner at the Garrick

To Anthony Powell

People in London, or in books,
are served up as discussion's game.
Fresh or *faisandé* — it's the same:
they're gossip's food, and we're the cooks.

To a Time-Serving Tide-Waiter

Your awful oleaginous urbanity
flows from a faith that the whole world is yours.
Like a wise eunuch, you see all humanity
as a *sérail* where you know the *détours*.

SICKNESS AND DEATH

Maupassant

Ruined by syphilis and high society
he raced downhill, and soon he lost that *sight*
which had so joyously viewed life's variety,
Then fashion — friends — and *reason* said goodnight.

Fever Landscape

A cracked crystal bell keeps chiming
to summon those who pass
on the highroad of sameness,
between the groves of glass.

To David Campbell

Last time, when the landrover broke your back,
“fetch whisky, aspirin, and help,” you said—
“but in that order.” Lyrebirds on the track
out to Manár are silent, now you're dead.

The Pilot

They found him in his Spitfire some days ago
and buried him with honour. He was nineteen,
an only son. His parents are dead long since;
but on my cheek their tears still run hot.

1981

THE IRISH LIGHTS

Autobiography in Characters

In Admiring Memory of Robert Lowell

Brocke

Towards the end of my first term, the headmaster came into form, and drew on the blackboard a pig, then jabbed it furiously with chalk, to make sure we beginners had got the hang of Latin declensions. As he jabbed, he said, "This pig, you see, is in the accusative case." When I look back today, I have the impression of something emblematically precise in this pig-jabbing jamboree. For Brocke the whole of life was in the accusative.

He jabbed us all with staccato rebukes:

"*Birdsall*. You're getting sleek. Just like a cat."

"*Pyddoke*. I'll sew those pockets up." "*Robertshaw*.

You smell Brocke's cheroot, you say? Well, soon, you'll smell his canes." (Long since forgotten, these archetypal schoolboy-names, resuscitated by freak of memory, bring the New Hall back fresh as a lick of paint.)

Brocke's puns and sermons all were driven home with equally intense accusative vigour.

"Why is the New Hall like a coffee-machine? Because (jab-jab) it stands in its own grounds."

"Whatever you do in life, aim high. Even if you never reach your target, aim (jab) high."

Saying goodbye to seniors who were leaving Brocke had got an out-of-character, man-of-the-wordly touch. Brushing his moustache

with the back of a fist, terse as a whisky-drinker, he went along the line-up shaking hands. "And don't forget, if any of you are ever on your beam ends . . ."

How odd a change of voice— I sensed obscurely — from the emotional tone of the "leaving gas" to which, each separately, we'd already been subjected. One was summoned to the cricket-field, to sit at Bocker's side and watch the sun get down behind the woods of Ercall (only God and Housman know the point of this ridiculous spelling for the hill we all called *Arcle*). So one fidgeted on the cricket-watching chair, while Bocker beat all round his subject. "You have on you semen from which future generations will be born." I came back moved, and utterly mystified.

"You'll smell his canes" — so Bocker liked to joke scouting into the North dorm on his round, a skater in bedroom slippers. Somehow his torchbeam never quite managed to catch Tebby and Robbo tucked up for a giggle— decent enough as chaps, but both quite mad. "Talking of canes," Tebby told us when he'd gone, "nobody at Wrockwardine gets a whacking, they're *barched* instead." We agreed it was funny: *barched*. "Out of all the schools we play, I hate Wrockwardine most. They stink, they've got bad fleas . . ." My contribution, normally acceptable, this time was brushed away like a bluebottle. "Don't try and be funny," the dorm prefect told me; while as for Tebby, well, if he had been Maskelyne and Devant combined, and I had spoilt his favourite trick, he would have turned no wilder — but his rage was coated in ice.

“It’s just like you,” he told me formally,
“to insult another school.”

Later on that night

I heard a piano: Brocker painfully
was twanking out a piece of music which —
from having seen it on his piano-stand —
I knew was called “In Summer Time on Bredon”.

The Foreign Body

I was a scholar. In College, where we lived, Latin and Greek were a competitive game for “cutting out” contemporaries and becoming one of the five Officers distinguished by velvet collars on their gowns; these, with the Roman title of Praefect, ran different branches of Winchester life — Hall, Chapel, Library, School. “Boy government” it was in extreme form. In the tradition of founder Wykeham, we made up a monkish Plantagenet-wise civil service — late Gothic, but with an 1850 annexe: the classics (so far from opening the doors of kindred civilisations) were the best available means of personal advancement. We were juvenile Victorian divines *à la* Dean Gaisford: Greek for us led to positions of considerable emolument.

Into this oiled, Trollopean machine there slipped a foreign body. Alan Blakeway instructed us in ancient history with such *verve* that tired old Athens and musty Rome jumped from their shelves and suddenly became contemporary and actual. He despised

pure scholarship, or rather treated it as something to take for granted, necessary as infrastructure, never in itself (heresy!) a worthwhile goal. He made us look outside the asphyxiating classroom box of prosy Greek, and elegiac tricks, into an ancient world that lived and breathed. His greatest love was the pre-classical Athens of the austere black-figure vases and maidens with the reserved archaic smile. Alan would later be translated to Oxford, his vision would *faire école*, and those who shared it be dubbed by Maurice Bowra *neo-Hellenists*. (Wadham's plump guru had in high degree the Oxford instinct for *classifying* people. He thought Wykehamists were a risible crew, and adored making jokes about them, e.g. "Imperious Crossman, dead and turned to Jay.") But back to Blakeway. Somehow he achieved his influence by enthusiasm and the magic of his essence. He was tall and very lame. Whatever his complaint, it forced him, as he walked, to throw out a leg in a sweeping movement of great elegance and high *panache*. One felt immediately not just compassion for the disability, but admiration for the stoical grace with which he dominated it. Thirtyish he must have been, with a round, rosy visage expressive of a certain cynical self-deprecating humour. He never spoke about himself except as a "lame usher". In fact his person had a propriety which seemed light-years removed from blackboard chalk. A double-breasted, irreproachably

dark-blue effect in serge accommodated his slight pot-belly and contributed to an indefinable distinction: half-worldly and half-ecclesiastical. His conversation, witty, violent, hilariously disloyal and indiscreet, was unlike anything I'd heard: not only an entertainment, but also flattering in the extreme by its assumption of one's own maturity. At sixteen we enjoy man's treatment. And my father had been hearty Cambridge; in his dressing-room a painted oar, plus rowing-men in sepia. Blakeway brought me a breath from a completely alien realm, one where material and spiritual values were capriciously and patchily mixed up; one where humanity ran side by side with wild intolerance; where the granitic integrity of the historian could co-exist, quite uncorrupted, with the runaway fun and fantasy of the gossip; a place of intimate, irresistible, intimidating appeal: first whiff of Oxford.

The Governor of Corvomar

The verbose and slippered informality of Lord Westhampton's official telegrams is a refinement on the pompous. It is meant to be taken as the style of a Whig magnate who, between *battues*, despatches Cabinet boxes, cutting with slashes of a shrewd horse-sense the knots tied up by industrious officials.

"My instinct was for this . . . I gave it him hot and strong about that." The effect, as intended, is more viceregal than any copperplate official style could be. But to his staff the truth belies the act. Pernickety maxims about the minute or the docket, and a profuse supply of ancient precepts on pins, and tags, and tapes, show up the instinctive statesman of the backwoods as just about the greatest Civil Servant of the lot; as one who has attained his Whiggish eminence only by years of the most patient padding through mazes of Secretariat routine, interspersed with a telling interlude or two in Whitehall, in the Minister's private office. In fact he is a classic illustration of the old adage that, in English life, the most adept professionals are those who put on the best turn as amateurs.

Tarbooshes

Their tarbooshes and belted camel-hair coats
hung up on pegs, the two tall Englishmen
(lifelong advisers to the Egyptian state),
red-faced as grizzled foxes,
sit fidgeting their co-respondent shoes
as they exchange hermetic recollection,
barbed with an occasional shorthand reference
to proclivities of long-dead undersecretaries.

The Hussar's Story

“I was twenty-five, and had still a *stage* to do before getting my squadron in the Guard Hussars. The front was quiet, and so to fill in time I went as A.D.C. to Corps Headquarters at some unpronounceable castle in Volhynia. And there one afternoon we were lunching late to celebrate the birthday of a comrade — when suddenly appeared before me a Sergeant of the security corps, saluted briskly and announced that at the telegraph bureau a message was arriving: *Personal for Corps Commander*. I went there and found coils of tape, like ticking vermicelli, which said what we already knew — because although cut off from Russia, insulated in our cocoon of discipline and tradition, we heard the German radio every night from Dresden — namely that in Petrograd a Provisional Government had been established; but it told us this officially — and confirmed that now the Emperor had abdicated. “I took this to my General, an old man who rode like a centaur still, as was quite fitting in a descendant of those Tartar Khans who had ruled in Central Asia.

“After consulting his Chief of Staff — a brilliant Major-General with the whole world before him — and the Colonels of twelve Guard regiments under his command, he sent the Tsar a message pledging loyalty and offering support, whatever the risk. Back came an answer in the Emperor's name that thanked him, but told him he must now obey

the Provisional Government. This arrived quite late, and I woke my General with it. I see him now, smallish in his nightshirt, his Eastern eyes were dead as almonds. 'Tsarya nyet,' he said, 'Rossiï nyet.' No Tsar, no Russia. That night the Chief of Staff, quicker in the uptake than others, shot himself.

"And the Corps Commander?"

From then on, he no longer wore the initial which, as an A.D.C. to the Emperor, he'd carried on his shoulder-straps. But still the shadow the imperial cypher had cast on the epaulette remained there like a ghost:
N II. "

He stopped. In spite of steady candles, and velvet English summer outside the window, and thirty years elapsed, a chill blew in. Some of us shivered. Unexpectedly, embarrassingly, I was close to tears. Our gentle hostess broke the stillness and murmured, "Parlons de fruits, parlons de fleurs."

The Man of Fashion

The man of fashion sat in his wheelchair
and watched the world. His kit was neo-Edwardian,
his waistcoat double-breasted and his sleeve
with careless care unbuttoned and doubled back.
Trousered in spongebag he observed me sharply,
then patted my manuscript: "I like it, but . . .
I've a few points on it. Here let me say
I do exactly the same thing with the Bard.
One third of my suggestions on his work
he accepts outright; one third he throws away
with contumely; about the rest, he says
'I'll think'. It will please me if you can take
my tentative proposals in this spirit."
Meanwhile, from down the passage, a typewriter
was talking hesitantly. I had seen the door —
and on it a plate which said in Gothic script
No Hawkers. Well, I melted — as my host
had planned I would — at being bracketed,
however loosely, with Chelsea's Bard, and England's.

My poem, a narrative, retailed the impressions
of a young diplomat on outbreak of war
interned in an enemy city. I had sent it
to a dozen publishers, and every time
boomerang-like it had come whizzing back
so hard it practically knocked me down.
But now I'd found a taker. I heard him out,
accepted some amendments where I saw
piercing good judgement, drew the line at others,
but noted as a curiosity
that he — this famous critic — was fascinated
not by my poetic merit (scant indeed)

but by details of diplomatic life and embassy routine. "Now tell me more about King's Messengers — about the Bag." So I told him. In due time my work got published to critical approval — and nil sales.

Some years later, on leave from a foreign post, I walked to see him on a sparkling morning. There's nothing fresher or more delicious than London's green places on a fine day after wet weather; all Kensington en route was mysterious and leafily inviting. Still in his wheelchair high above the Thames, my friend was otherwise unrecognisable: lapels, *revers*, brass buttons, hacking coat, had all been jettisoned, and he was dressed in double-breasted grey with a grey tie — grey as the greyest of F.O. officials. For the man of fashion, Edwardiana were out, wrecked by the Teddy Boy. But that wasn't all. The room had been redecorated in old-Chelsea green — traditional *eau de Tamise* — but with a rather modish picking-out in off-white. And the dusty half-full bottle of sweetish medium sherry was now replaced by a trolley groaning with booze. I positively got gin and ginger, grateful after my trek. Then, big surprise, an actual dining-room elaborately interior-decorated with wallpaper in a Regency of stripes and curtains looped and pelmeted. Question-mark. "It's from the proceeds of *The Cocktail Party*. The Bard, who used to have his meals on a tray, is frightfully suspicious of the whole thing. 'You know', he says, 'that room where we have dinner —

surely it has new papering on the walls?’
As for the pelmets, he distrusts them *deeply*.
But tell me”, he continued, “the Princess,
how is she? *The Young Visitors*, I know:
it’s more Salteena-trouble; I’m afraid
I’m partial to fresh air and Royalty.”

So lunch went on — and though I might be bursting
to talk of Waugh or Orwell, we were stuck
with *Gotha* for main dish and, as a savoury,
diplomacy-on-toast.

I’d long been hoping
he’d show my verses to his Bard and get them
some form of benediction. I saw myself
as the young Pushkin when, still at the Lycée,
he read his poems out before Derzhávin,
the famous laureate from the reign of Catherine:
“aged Derzhávin saw and blessed us
as he descended to the grave . . .*” A time
came when John told me: “Last night I read out
to Eliot your *Abstract of Persia*. He . . .”
a long and teasing aposiopesis . . .
“he laughed, and said ‘Well, a bit overcharged,
isn’t it?’” So, goodbye, I thought, Derzhávin.

One evening the elusive Bard appeared:
it was a clergyman who’d put on mufti —
a brownish, tweedish coat and deep-grey bags;
very sweet and gentle and modest, with a slow
and slightly singsong voice of regional type.
John led the talk, and Christopher sustained it,
witty friend of us all. John chose as topic
U-diction and non-U. Christopher suggested
that the Bard should entitle his next play
The Mantelpiece. Eliot agreed and called it

*Pushkin: *Eugene Onegin*, Chapter Eight, II.

“my latest mirthquake”. I said it should be written on *notepaper*. I had my breezy persona, I told a story in Berlin dialect and the latest F.O. jokes, and generally showed off; but then came home feeling ashamed. I went back to my post, and never saw either flat-mate again. Hideously disfigured by his slow illness, the man of fashion died. My debt to him was vast.

And even Eliot seems to have owed him something; this shy man must certainly have needed social hints for his *Cocktail Party*, for smooth manipulation of exits and entrances in other plays; and where could such know-how be better got than from the extrovert in the wheelchair? In fact the Bard avowed this in his feline admission of debt to Hayward “for advice on vocabulary, idiom and manners”: an Eliot joke, a piece of possumry — but with it, perhaps, a sliver of affection.

The Irish Lights

From the Isles of Scilly we were sailing fast
towards Ireland. I had taken a fortnight's leave
and a pierhead jump, from Cornish Fowey, to join
a friend who was cruising westward in his yacht —
Australian envoy, hero of Gallipoli,
most generous nautical host — with a congenial
ship's company. By a full moon and warm
breeze on the quarter *Yarinya* slithered along
as if the passage was oiled. I stayed at the helm
all night; what kept me up there was no scruple
about waking my relief, but the enchantment
of anchoritic watches at the wheel
that give a spell for sizing up one's life.
In service hierarchy I was due
for a small post of my own. I'd just been told:
"It's Jordan — and we want you to go out
in November." This meant little enough to me.
Russia, then Western Europe had engrossed me
in recent time, and by comparison
the Arab world appeared a loud distraction.
Yet, as careerist calculus, Amman,
endured for three years, might lead somewhere else . . .
In the meantime I was certain that my conduct
must avoid the English fault of getting engaged
viscerally in causes of Arabia.
For sure, in a professional sense this was
textbook advice. I gave it to myself
in categoric terms.

Once years ago
we'd paid a glancing visit to Amman —
I could recall a run-down Roman theatre,
and a still more run-down hotel. Of course
there were some problems: a few months before,
Glubb Pasha had been sacked; but the Embassy
had a first-class staff, the house was quite agreeable . . .

The speed of sail is magnified by moonlight,
and at the helm of a big yawl that rushed
train-like towards Ireland I had a strong sense
of freedom and exhilaration. While
the night wore thin I began to strain my eyes
for the first of the Irish lights. This concentration
brought with it a suspicion of anxiety
which by contrast only made my happiness
more absolute.

Next evening, in the peace
of Cork's Crosshaven anchorage, someone
said "What about the news?" We turned it on
and caught the tail-end of a phrase: ". . . in view
of Colonel Nasser's decision to nationalise
the Suez Canal". This had less relevance
for me than the report of a great storm
that had just missed us on our passage over.

Since then, I've learnt to see the coastwise lamps
exhibited by crude ambition as
fata morgana luring us far off track.
But now, goodbye. The gale-force of Arabia
is driving me, and poems, like bets, are off.

(continued)

Some critics' opinions of Johnston's translations from Pushkin and Lermontov.

'The reader who knows no Russian is cut off from Pushkin as a lyrical poet and yet can respond to a narrative poem like *Eugene Onegin* in say, Sir Charles Johnston's Byronic version . . .'

V. S. PRITCHETT: *The New Yorker*

'Johnston, in sympathy with Pushkin, is a craftsman who goes for economy of statement. Himself an original and accomplished poet, he is ideally fitted to bring us as close as we are ever likely to be to Pushkin's original.'

JOHN BAYLEY

' . . . A very large debt is owed to . . . Johnston for (*his*) translation of Lermontov.'

T. J. BINYON:

The Times Literary Supplement

Johnston's translation of *Narrative Poems by Pushkin and Lermontov* was published in 1983 by Random House, New York, and in October 1984 he was invited to give a reading from his original poems and translations at the Library of Congress in Washington.

Charles Johnston entered the Diplomatic Service in 1936 and served as third secretary in Tokyo from 1939 to 1942. Between 1948 and 1951 he was first secretary in Madrid, and in 1956 he was appointed Ambassador to Jordan. At present he is Registrar of the Order of Michael and St George, and hon. Librarian of Toynbee Hall.

Some critics' opinions of poems in this volume

'... A long, personal poem *Towards Mozambique* written mostly in internment when Japan entered the war ... a living and breathing impression of Japan, and a sharp, novelistic sense of one man's war ... this long and intelligent poem is humanly moving and impressive ... His couplet about Petra is unforgettable; Pope would have been pleased to have written it. In poems of autobiography and travel, he is Byron's best pupil.'

PETER LEVI

'*Towards Mozambique* should now be seen, I think, as one of the outstanding poems of the war ... Johnston's small but weighty output of original work, now that we have at last come to know it, enriches the poetic legacy of his generation.'

CLIVE JAMES: *From the Land of Shadows*

'Johnston's eminence as a translator should not obscure his own poetry's merits.'

ANDREW WATERMAN: *PN Review*

'The problem with Johnston's own poetry is ... that its felicities are too scarce and its ambassadorial complacencies too ...'

WILLIAM SCAMMELL: *The London Magazine*

'It seems natural to his skill to go back to the direct manner of Byron, Pushkin, Lermontov. Lowell could also write like this and it seems to be a question of class.'

JOHN BAYLEY: *The London Review of Books*



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